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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the writing sample which is part of the California High School Proficiency Examination. The test itself is described, methods of scoring are outlined, and specific examples of candidates' responses at various scoring levels are provided and discussed. (AA)

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THE CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION:

EVALUATING THE WRITING SAMPLES

by

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PREFACE

The California High School Proficiency Examination (CHSPE) has been an alternative to high school graduation since 1975. High school students who pass the examination may, with parental consent, leave school prior to graduation with a proficiency certificate--the legal equivalent to a diploma. Adults are also eligible to take the examination.

The California Association of Teachers of English (CATE) became interested in the CHSPE at its inception because the examination is intended to certify that those who pass have reading and writing skills equivalent to an average California high school graduate. Although an illustrative writing question is included in the examination brochure, English teachers have been in the dark as to criteria used in judging the writing, and no sample papers have been available.

By 1976, it was evident that a report on the writing test portion of the CHSPE would be of interest to teachers, students, parents, and others. With encouragement and financial support from the Bay Area Writing Project and from CATE, arrangements were completed in July of this year for publication of a report describing the CHSPE writing test, illustrating the general levels of candidate responses, and outlining the procedures used in evaluating papers. The co-authors have both served as CHSPE readers.

The papers represented here show the selective range of writing ability of those adults and high school students seeking the equivalent of a diploma either because they wish to leave high school early or because they dropped out prior to graduation. The scope of the report is deliberately limited: it deals with the writing itself, with criteria, and with scoring procedures. CHSPE readers are not aware of the level at which passing scores are set; that decision, determined after scoring is completed, is made by state officials in compliance with legislation mandating a minimum proficiency test for high school equivalency purposes.

We wish to thank C. Kermeen Fristrom, President of CATE, for encouraging preparation of this report and for CATE's assistance in its distribution and publicity. We are also grateful to Alexander I. Law, Dale Carlson, and John Gilroy of the California State Department of Education for their cooperation and to the Department itself for permission to prepare the report. Alan Seder of Educational Testing Service, Inc., helped the authors obtain needed CHSPE material. Above all, thanks are due Kenneth Lane, a staff member with the Writing Project and the CATE Legislative Committee chairman, for initially proposing such a report and for coordinating its preparation.

James R. Gray, Director
Bay Area Writing Project
University of California, Berkeley
August 30, 1977

ADMINISTRATION OF THE WRITING TEST

The California High School Proficiency Test (CHSPE) is administered two or three times a year at centers across the state, usually in November, March, and June. The two writing tasks on the CHSPE are given at the beginning of the examination so candidates are fresh and their writing is not affected by any trouble they may have with the multiple-choice part of the test. Each of the two writing tasks is allotted twenty minutes, and candidates are encouraged to spend that entire time working on each task. The candidates write in pencil on lined answer sheets.

THE SETTING FOR READINGS

Reading and scoring of papers takes place under the general supervision of Educational Testing Service, Inc. (ETS), which has thus far conducted the testing under a contract with the California State Department of Education, the agency authorized by law to develop and administer the test. Upwards of forty teachers (from high schools and colleges) serve as readers for each test, guided by more highly experienced readers who act as question leaders and as table leaders. A majority of these readers have participated in holistic readings for ETS at other times, often as readers of Advanced Placement Examinations in English or of the essay portion of the College Level Examination Program administered in recent years by the California State University system. In addition, some have participated either in composition evaluations held in local school districts or in invitational summer workshops of the Bay Area Writing Project, where they had been introduced to holistic reading as a technique for evaluating student writing. Because of limitations imposed by transportation costs, the majority of readers to date have been drawn from the Northern California area where ETS offices are located. Readers work a full day on the task, usually on a Saturday, staying with it until all papers are scored.

THE METHOD OF HOLISTIC READING

By now many teachers of English have had direct experience with the holistic reading method, or at least have heard it explained. This method, pioneered by ETS over the past twenty-five or more years, depends on the assumption that the whole of a piece of writing is much greater than the sum of its parts--particularly that the whole is more important than any

cluster of errors and strengths which happen to be called into notice by a critic-observer.

In the case of the CHSPE readings, the following procedure is used:

1) The writing assignment itself suggests what a reader should expect in a sensible and full response from a writer. So, after briefly discussing such a hypothetical response, the question leader and table leaders then study roughly fifty actual papers and, independently of one another, assign scores 1 through 5 (5 for the best papers) according to their broad judgments of competency and quality.
2) The question leader and table leaders then discuss their results, selecting as ideal samples, or "anchor papers," those papers on which there was strong scoring agreement and arriving at compromises on almost all the remaining papers. (Occasionally a sampled paper will not be used as an anchor paper because its problems make consensus difficult, if not impossible.)
3) Working as a team, the question leader and table leaders then write a descriptive guide for readers to use in assigning papers to each of the five score categories. This descriptive guide, or "rubric," results from the team's attempt to describe those anchor papers it has selected for each score category.
4) After meeting with the readers and explaining the scoring guide, the question leader guides the group in the process of learning to focus on the "official" scores. This "tooling up" process moves slowly at first as tables of readers discuss the anchor papers; gradually they reach a high level of agreement consistent with the official scores. Six to eight readers usually work at one table, so that easy communication is possible. Occasionally it proves useful to make slight changes in the wording of the scoring guide itself when most readers find it incomplete, unrealistically inflexible, or puzzlingly ambiguous.
5) Once the question leader is satisfied that readers agree sufficiently on scores, the readers begin scoring papers instead of mere samples. Table leaders, early in the reading, and for as long as seems necessary to the question leader, spend their time re-reading papers which

have already been read and scored by individuals at their tables. Table leaders thus act as "quality controls," confirming the initial evaluations given by readers or advising them to reconsider that occasional score which seems unreliable. In addition, table leaders assist readers by serving as consultants on questionable or problematical papers.

6) Each paper is read independently by two different readers sitting at different tables. The top score can therefore be a 10 (two 5's) and the bottom score can be a 2 (two 1's).

7) If a paper receives two scores which differ by two or more points--say a 5 and a 3--then the question leader or a table leader reads that paper a third time in an effort to resolve the issue, doubling his score to give the final official score. Usually in such a situation his score falls between the two original scores, so that the sum of the original scores would apparently have served. But in an effort to insure against any wide discrepancies to the detriment of the candidate, the question leader sees to it that each such paper gets a third, independent reading. (Actually a considerable portion of all papers have had at least three independent readings--all of the sample or anchor papers, of course, plus many papers which are "check-read" in the "quality control" by table leaders, plus all questionable papers brought to the table leaders by the regular readers, plus the small body of "split score" papers resolved by the required third reading.)

THE WRITING TASKS

Following are the writing assignments given candidates at the 1976-77 examinations. In each case students had twenty minutes to respond.

November Test

A. Write one or two paragraphs explaining why you would or would not report another person you saw cheating on an important exam such as the CHSPE.

B. Write a letter of one or two paragraphs to a friend or relative who is seriously considering taking the CHSPE. On the

basis of your knowledge of the CHSPE and reasons for taking it, explain in a letter why you believe the person to whom you are writing should or should not take the exam.

March Test

A. Write a one or two paragraph letter of recommendation for a friend or relative you know well. Assume this person will use the letter in seeking the kind of job for which he or she is best qualified.

B. Write one or two paragraphs explaining why you believe physical education should or should not be required in high school.

June Test

A. Write one or two paragraphs explaining why you do or do not believe that the Equal Rights for Women movement has been good for our society.

B. Write a one or two paragraph letter to a friend or relative explaining why you decided to take the California High School Proficiency Examination.

AN ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO TWO QUESTIONS

Question 1: A Letter to a Friend or Relative

The following appeared as Question B on the CHSPE administered in June 1977:

> Write a one or two paragraph letter to a friend or relative explaining why you decided to take the California High School Proficiency Examination.

This question asks the student to use a commonplace form he is quite familiar with and to address a personal audience, so the language of the response can be informal, revealing the writer's voice. Before he paid his test fee, the writer probably considered why the CHSPE was in his best interest; thus, this test question allows him to write something he has thought about already.

Readers were asked to use the following scoring guide on Question B, June 1977:

Students should be rewarded for what they do well in response to the question.

SCORING GUIDE:

5 Shows not only a well organized and competent explanation of why the student took the exam but also a mature handling of sentence structure and diction.

4 Shows competent handling of the language but lacks the insight or development of a better paper's response.

3 Provides some supporting reasons for the choice made, but develops those reasons somewhat casually; demonstrates generally competent handling of syntax and mechanics.

2 Shows problems with sentence structure and mechanics or is only slightly developed.

1 Is on the topic but shows serious flaws with sentence construction, organization and mechanics--or is simply too brief to demonstrate any writing competency.

0 Has no answer or fails to face the question. If you think that you have a 0 paper, bring it to your table leader.

Sample, or "Anchor," Papers Used for Question B, June 1977

Following are selected sample answers which were given for Question B, along with discussion of reasons for the scores assigned.

Score Category Five

Paper B (14) High score - 5

Dear C,

As you know, X was permanently layed off when Louisiana Pacific closed its plywood plant here in Fort Bragg. Since then he has decided it would be better for our family if he got a job in something other than the lumber business. Ecological pressure is making it a ver, unstable occupation. He has decided to try to go to work for the county as a laborer and the pay is very low to start with. I will have to work also, to support our family. Therefore, I decided to take the California High School Proficiency Examiniation in hopes of getting a better job than I now have. Without a high school diploma good jobs are hard to find. Wish me luck and a clear head.

Your Friend,

J.

Paper B (21) High score - 5

Dear Linda,

I'm sure that you can understand why I'm taking the Proficiency Examiniation. After all, you took it for the very same reason. We all know that colleges require a diploma or something representing the mastering of basic skills, and since I was lacking a couple units of P.E. credits, and not able to graduate, I decided the Prof. Exam was the next best thing. Actually, it may even be better, because with the Cert. of Prof., you are certain that a person has the basic skills, whereas a person can receive the diploma and nevertheless be functionaliy illiterate. Naturally, the skills stressed are only survival skills, only the foundation of knowledge, and a person must know a great deal in addition to these if they are to have a comprehensive knowledge of the world. Still even, if they are only survival skills, without them a person would probably suffer some grave difficulties.

Discussion of B (14) and B (21)

These "well organized and competent explanations" illustrate the range of high scoring responses to the CHSPE. Here the writers are high school dropouts who, out of evident personal needs--the desire to further education, the quest for a better job--have decided to take the examination. These letters immediately appeal to the audience, a personal friend. B (21) is unusually tight in its logic, with strong links to guide the reader; B (14) shows a high degree of relaxed clarity.

These superior responses also illustrate "a mature handling of sentence structure and diction." B (21) relies on subordination of ideas to express complex relationships, and words like "after all," "actually," "naturally," and "still" provide smooth links as well. B (14) also uses a variety of simple and complex sentences. Neither paper wastes words and neither writer is afraid of showing off his vocabulary appropriately: in B (14) "ecological" is a nice touch; B (21) uses "mastering," "functionally illiterate," "foundation of knowledge," and "comprehensive."

Score Category Four

Paper B (4) High range - 4

Dear J,

After carefully examining the alternatives, I've decided to take the C.H.S.P.E. instead of the other classes that would give me the full amount of credits for a high school diploma. I realize that a diploma would be much better for my record, but my state board exam is coming up very soon now, and I have to have the equivalent right away.

I should have been working on all this a long time ago, but sence I didn't dc it, this will have to do for now. Had they had a test of this kind when I had to leave school 7 yrs. ago, I wouldn't be here now.

Discussion of B (4)

B (4) was competently but incompletely written by an adult with a specific vocational plan that she should have developed in her letter. The writer explains her reasons for taking the test, subordinating her ideas in paragraph one into two sentences that move the writing. An interested reader might well like to know what "state board" B (4) is going to take and why the "equivalent" is needed so urgently, but the letter form to a personal friend tends to invite such ellipsis of ideas, after all.

Strengths of the paper are its relaxed clarity, its beginning with obvious reasoning ("After carefully examining the alternative"), and the fine sentence beginning with "Had" in paragraph two.

Paragraph two, however, places this sample in category four. In sentence two, concrete nouns are needed as substitutes for "this kind," although the sentence itself is well structured. "Competent handling of the language" would be improved by the addition of specifics to give the reader more understanding when B (4) writes,"I wouldn't be here now."

Score Category Three

Paper B (13) Mid score - 3

Dear J

I'm writing this letter in regards to the California High School Proficiency Examination which I have decided to take. I looked into it very carefully, I talked to a few teachers, the Dean of Boys, and my parents. They all agree that getting my high school diploma is a very wise idea, not a new idea but a wise one. I have studied hard these last few week and I think, I can honestly say, I'm ready for this test.

I almost changed my mind, the other day, about taking this test. Untill I went to work and realized I could be pumping gas all my life, I changed my mind back right away. I think you should look into this test it could open new doors for you.

Yours Truly

P.

Paper B (27) Mid score - 3

Dear E,

I have decided to take the California High School Proficiency Examination because I feel that by passing it, it will enable me to attend a community college. While attending a community college I shall be enrolled in prerequisite courses which will then enable me to attend a four year University.

By taking this Examiniatin (and passing) I will not be attending High School and wasting time which I feel is precious to my future.

Love ya' always,

T.

Discussion of B (13) and B (27)

These papers received a score of 3 because the reasons their writers offered for taking the examination are developed "somewhat casually."

B (27)'s reasons in paragraph one are almost empty. She says "love ya' always" to her friend, but the body of her letter is not addressed to a friend: it is formal and "essay-ish"; she does not fill in information about her career goals, just "prerequisite courses," and that second sentence in paragraph one is irrelevant, showing no connection with taking the test. A friend would also like to know specifically why the writer is so anxious to leave high school. In addition, in sentence one the writer has a notably illogical reference error.

The ideas in B (13) are developed, but very casually, even mistakenly. The writer speaks of "getting my high school diploma," which he will not, even if he passes the CHSPE. He, too, has sentence construction problems: comma-splice in paragraph one, sentence two; dependent adverbial clause that "floats" in paragraph two, sentence two; and run-on sentences at the end.

Score Category Two

Paper B (1) Low range - 2

Dear C,

How is everything with you? I hope you are enjoying school. I really like going to y____ highschool this year. It is quite a change from z____ highschool. This school is much smaller.

I plan on taking the Ca. H.S. Proficiency Exam next week. If I pass, then I do not have to finish going to highschool next year. Although I probably will finish, nevertheless. But there is a strong possibility that I will be able to be a ski instructor at Squaw Valley during the winter. I would live with the X's in their extra room. I would pay them out of my salary from instructing. It would be a wonderful experience! But I might wait until I graduate from high school.

Please visit me soon. Love, A.

Discussion of B (1)

This writer seems seriously to depart from the assignment because she fails to link passing the CHSPE and leaving high school with her Squaw Valley job plans. B (1) needs to show that working at Squaw Valley and living away from home on her own would be a more profitable experience than finishing high school and that's why passing the CHSPE is important to her. This problem is typical of the writer who has many ideas clearly in mind and probably sees their relationships, but fails to transfer these relationships to paper.

The paper is indeed "slightly developed," only three sentences of the sample directly dealing with the topic. Paragraph one is chatty and irrelevant to the issue, but the friendly letter form does seem to invite such language use.

Most of B (1)'s sentences are short and follow the same simple construction, with "I" and "It" the favorite sentence headwords. This choppy style suggests a somewhat feeble sense of sentence structure, especially considering the "although" clause fragment in paragraph two.

Score Category One

Paper T (4) Low score - 1

Dear M

Hello Mr. M this is the first time to write a letter to you. Now I'm taking test of GED - I'm planning to go to college this fall session. Of course I graduated high school my country but this college requires California High school diploma. Any way I have to get diploma. Now I'm attending high school. I will graduate in September. I hope I would get permision from college I really want to study in college this is my main reason to take

I hope after finishing my study I would help you job

Sincerly

K.

Paper B (11) Low score - 1

Dear J

Hi, just writting to let you know I've decided to take the proficiency test. I sounds' great to me, if I pass it I'll get out of High Shcool and into college.

Here's the great part if I fail I'm in High School and can try again, and it only cost ten-dollars a really steal. The only really problem is it takes nine weeks before you know if you passed or failed. Well take care of yourself see you are Chirstmas.

Your brother

J.

Discussion of T (4) and B (11)

These papers are scored in category one for the same reasons: serious flaws in mechanics, diction, and sentence structure. The writer of T (4), however, is not a native speaker. His errors show that: "the first time to write a letter," "taking test of GED," "I graduated high school my country." A few sentences are run-ons and the final two have not been completed. Obviously, the writer needs more experience in studying written English as a second language.

B (11) also has trouble with his language and with his reasoning. Passing the CHSPE will not automatically open college doors; why is waiting nine weeks for examination results such a problem to the writer? He fails to develop why he took the test, except to say it is a bargain. Even more seriously, he has a myriad of errors: spelling, apostrophe, capitalization, run-ons.

Question 2: A Persuasive Explanation

The following appeared as Question B on the CHSPE administered in March 1977:

> Write one or two paragraphs explaining why you believe physical education should or should not be required in high school.

The question is fairly typical of one of the two writing assignments included so far on each CHSPE, in that it prompts the student to write a brief persuasive explanation about an issue current in the high school setting or prominent on the social or political scene. Although the directions call for the writer to take a stand on whether physical education "should or should not be required," the examiners had no intention of arbitrarily ruling out a response by the more thoughtful student who might develop a unique position on the issue. By specifying "one or two paragraphs" the question allows for a brief, unified response but also invites the superior writer to develop a more sophisticated structure of two (or more) paragraphs. This topic had much currency at the time it appeared because of recent California legislation allowing school boards to release eleventh and twelfth graders from what had previously been compulsory physical education for each year of high school.

Readers were asked to use the following scoring guide on Question B, March 1977:

SCORING GUIDE:

5 Takes a clearly defined position and explores it thoroughly with complex reasoning or supports it with two or more relevant reasons. Tends to be error free and have one or more of the following:

- especially effective diction
- particular examples
- imaginative insights

4 Takes a clearly defined position but explores the position somewhat more generally and with less development and imagination than a "5" paper.

3 States its position with one or more reasons but may be simplistic or repetitive in explanation.

2 May not take a position or is brief and/or irrelevant.

1 Is inadequate in content and seriously marred by errors.

0 Does not address the question. See the Table Leader.

Note that this guide makes a 4 paper one which is clearly associated with the description of a 5 paper, and that a 2 paper fits the description of a 1 paper more nearly than that of a 3 paper. The point is important to readers, for the mid-point score 3 should not be arrived at be default,

as a result of indecisiveness on the reader's part about either a higher or lower score. That is, the description of a 3 paper is more useful to a reader when it does not offer itself as a "dumping ground" for papers not clearly upper half or lower half. A 3 paper should not, in general, be just a weak 4 or a strong 2, but should be described as a discrete category of its own.

Following are selected sample answers which were written for Question B, along with discussion of reasons for the assigned scores.

Score Category Five

Paper B (11) High score - 5

I believe physical education should be continued in high school, but in a more progressive system. As it is now many kids shy away from P.E. because of several reasons. One is that the competition is too much. When you have winners, you've got to have losers. Competition is healthy, but I think we place too much importance on being king of the mountain. A more beneficial system would be hiking, or bike riding. Those who want to come in first can do so, but the emphasis should be in bringing out the full athletic potential in each student, instead of those who don't need P.E., they are active enough as it is. Also, by forcing P.E. on kids, you make them reject it that much more. If we had a system by which each student could bring out the good inside we would have a much better attendance record and grade average too.

Paper B (40) High score - 5

I believe physical education should not be required in high school. It accomplishes nothing and is a waste of money.

The only reason I can see for physical education being taught in school is, the school officials believe it keeps the person in shape. This is untrue. If the person doesn't want to participate they won't and nothing can be done to

change this. Also, the time alotted for this class is insufficient. The actual time spent in the activity is approximately 30-40 mins. This does nothing for the individual. It is the individual's responsibility to keep their own body shape. If they fail to do this, then <u>they</u> must suffer the consequence.

I am not saying physical education shouldn't be taught. I'm just saying it shouldn't be required. It isn't a course that will help you when you leave school. Physical education is just fine as an elective and that's what it should be. If it is made an elective, it just might be fun.

<u>Discussion of B (11) and B (40)</u>

These papers from the top category demonstrate obvious truths -- one, that top level papers are by no means perfect; and two, that papers in a given scoring category by no means have a stereotypical sameness.

B (11) consists of a single, fairly well-formed paragraph, beginning with a topic sentence which takes a "clearly defined" and almost unique point of view rather than a mere <u>pro</u> or <u>con</u> stance, thus at the outset suggesting "complex reasoning." The paragraph supports the point of view with two arguments against the present situation as well as two suggestions for improvements possible in a more "progressive system." The reasoning contains "particular examples" in the matters of "hiking or bike riding," has at least one effective use of diction ("king of the mountain"), and shows some imagination in foreseeing outcomes of better attendance record and grade averages (see concluding sentence). In sum, although the paragraph is somewhat loose in its matters of reference (and even contains one comma-splice), it tends to be reasonably coherent and provides a majority of the key aspects listed for a 5 paper.

B (40) uses the available lined space on the examination paper to offer an answer which has an obvious beginning, middle, and end, with a topic paragraph which takes a specific stand, and a concluding paragraph which has the grace of an effective clincher sentence. The central paragraph contains fairly complex reasoning to explain why the writer believes physical education does not meet the key objective for which (the writer

assumes) it is intended, with at least two specific supporting explanations. Overall the paper contains notably effective diction ("accomplishes," "participate," "alotted /sic/," "insufficient," "individual," "approximately," "responsibility," "consequences"). Although this paper does show problems with referents (consistency of number in "person/they" and vague-referent "this"), it is otherwise reasonably free of error.

Score Category Four

Paper B (5) High range - 4

Physical health goes hand in hand with mental health. When one is physically out of shape he tends to be lower than par mentally. One's body will be with him all through life, it should be taken care of.

I believe physical education should be required in high school. Many students do not have the time for physical activities out side of school. The hour, or so, spent on physical education is also a release from the tensions of academic courses.

Discussion of B (5)

The scoring guide identifies category four as a weak version of category five. Sheer length gives an obvious clue to the "less development" in B (5), but the paper does have a "clearly defined position" which has more than an utterly pedestrian purpose; that is, B (5) contains a thesis of at least some interest. In addition, at least two reasons appear to support the thesis itself. Although there is one comma-splice, it involves a sentence pairing which makes it more nearly forgivable. Otherwise, the paper seems to have a simple but confident style with perfectly acceptable diction and nothing at all notable in the way of egregious error. At the same time, of course, there is little here in the way of imaginative insight or specific example.

Score Category Three

Paper B (2) Mid score - 3

I believe physical education should be required in high school because it will help disapline a person to follow a pattren such as required when employed. It also help's keep a person fit and helps him to adheare to rules of physical fittness. Physical education helps one to get along with other people by teaching good sportsmanship and fairness of rules of school as well as of life.

Paper B (19) Mid score - 3

I think physical education should be required for (2) two years of high school but available for (4) four years. For people who are not athletically minded and for those whose body's are not athletic, I don't feel they should be made to go through the full (4) four years. I do think it should be there for at least (2) two years be cause young people need the exercise. Just be cause I feel it should be only required for (2) two years does not mean however that I do not want it available for the ones who want it after that time. Some people enjoy it and I feel it should be there for them to take advantage of.

Discussion of B (2) and B (19)

Papers B (2) and B (19) offer the two extremes of the scoring description, with B (2) notably marred by "some grammatical and mechanical problems," and B (19) so "repetitive in explanation" as to be almost circular in its logical progression.

B (2) suggests that the writer has some genuine maturity of thought, with three or four specific reasons advanced in support of the stand in favor of required physical education. The paragraph contains nothing much, however, in the way of particular examples, nor much in the way of imaginative insights, so it is not in the superior range with regard to idea content. Were the paper not flawed by a multiplicity of errors (five misspellings in a

short piece; the irrelevant apostrophe in "help's"), it might be judged a possible 4.

B (19) is neither too brief nor mindless, but its sequence suggests more sophistication of thought than is actually there. After striking out with a topic sentence which seems to contain a clearly defined alternative to either a pro or con position, the entire piece of writing simply falls into repetitive locutions which add little or nothing and which echo stylistically the trivial use of numbers in parentheses. The errors, though individually flagrant, are actually minor in the midst of fairly smooth-running syntax and sentence sense.

Score Category Two

Paper B (14) Low range - 2

I believe tha physical education should be a required class for high school students not only are kids out of shape but many are overweight also. Which could easily be curbed by p.e. I think the kids of today are just getting too lazy. which as we all know is a health hazard, right? If there was a type of physical education which every student was required to take I think we would all be alot better off. I am strongly for required physical education.

Discussion of B (14)

Paper B (14) receives a score of 2 chiefly because of its serious errors--the run-on sentences at the outset, the two dangling "which" clauses, the chatty intrusions ("right?" and "alot"). A reader has little faith that this writer has a fundamental grasp of the sentence as a written convention; in fact, the writer truly seems to try to write as he might loosely speak. Moreover, though the writer does take a stand on this issue, the single point is overworked with repetition. In some respects the paper is "three-ish" in content but is too marred for a middle score.

Score Category One

Paper B (10) Low score - 1

I think physical education should be required in high schools. My reason being, is that alot of students would not get any excersise if it was not for the program.

On the other hand if you were a student that has a active hobby, for example, riding, dancing, surfing, or any other. That you could be excused from that class and still recieve credit.

Paper B (23) Low score - 1

I think physical education should not be required in high school. Because it demands to maush from the student. My opion is that if a student wants the P.E. he/she should and if not he/she should be forced to take it. I think they should make math required more then it is, you only need (10) ten crait of math and you need (40) forty of P.E. I think that is dumb because you use math in life more often than physical stergh.

Discussion of B (10) and B (23)

Papers B (10) and B (23) present the extremes of a 1 score -- B (10) with its excess of serious writing errors and B (23) with its pointless opinion at the outset and its irrelevancy about mathematics.

In B (10), after the initial sentence, which is, after all, almost verbatim from the topic question itself, the writer does not manage a single well-formed sentence. This writer does not write mere tag-on fragments, the kind which are at least acceptable in professional writing. Instead, he begins three sentences and drifts into one syntactical maze after another or simply quits "mid-air," as it were. This writer has no grasp of standard sentence syntax whatsoever. In addition, of course, there are misspellings and diction errors.

In B (23), in addition to the pointlessness of the initial stand and the digression into an irrelevant issue, the writer suggests a kind of

functional illiteracy with the particular word-form problems ("maush" for "much," "opion" for "opinion," "crait" for "credit," "stergh" for "strength"). If this were not enough, one could cite other errors--the tag-on fragment ("Because..."), the confusion of positive and negative (following sentence), the use of "then" for "than," the comma-splice.

SOME OBSERVATIONS BY READERS OF CHSPE WRITING TESTS

What do teachers who read the CHSPE think of candidates' efforts, and what implications do they see in them for improving the composition skills of students in their own classrooms?

Probably most teachers of high school English appreciate that students who present themselves as candidates for the CHSPE certificate are not a representative cross-section of sixteen and seventeen year old youngsters in California high schools. That matter considered, most readers agree that the quality of writing is generally quite acceptable, that the quality of thinking is at times impressive, and that most students who take the test have a reasonable command of sentence structure. On the other hand, teachers of English can also appreciate that at one time or another during a reading session the readers find examples of almost every possible usage and punctuation error imaginable (if not every misspelling for most common words).

As to the questions themselves, some readers think that although the informal letter form elicits enough language to demonstrate basic structures and a general sense of organization, it often does not prompt much scope and development. Papers may be more or less well put together, but they often say little. On the other hand, questions which call for explaining opinions, such as those about physical education and the women's equal rights movement, allow the writer to demonstrate his capacity for more depth of thought, with more likelihood that he will use subordination and coordination of ideas -- the heart of writing.

Perhaps because each reader sees so much dirty wash hanging out by way of error, he at first grows more aware of what he comes to see as the "least washable" issues -- those errors which seem rampant and genuinely

troublesome, rather than merely irksome. It is these serious errors, perhaps, which teachers of English should give more thought to. For instance, even the best writers, as one can see from the illustrative anchor papers, show some fumbling with matters of reference. Loose and vague reference and inconsistencies of person and number seem to be the norm, notably ambiguous reference is frequent, and some writers offer a mixed bag of reference errors which a reader must ignore in order to read at all. But later a reader begins to pay much less attention to these errors than he really should, simply because they are legion; thus, if a reader is not careful, serious matters may in time minimize themselves, as important problems fade from his awareness.

Despite the many errors, readers probably would agree that the general sentence structure is better than one might anticipate, with comma-splices commonplace but with overall clarity fair, once one is willing to overlook mere convention and accept tag-on fragments as if one were reading prose fiction rather than non-fiction.

For some readers, two features dominate the writing samples: inconsiderate, almost unconscious lack of concern for clarity of reference; and careless but more or less acceptable shards of coherent syntax. With this addition-- that these papers do include a sizable body of examples written by able and effective young writers.

The experience of reading the CHSPE has led some teachers to suggest that, in teaching composition to their own students, they intend to

1) give some assignments which ask the student to handle a specific topic for a designated audience;
2) take much more care in searching for truly challenging and effective issues for students to write about;
3) use a broader range of writing assignments, diminishing the amount of writing about literature;
4) have students practice developing general statements that can be supported by specific examples or examples from personal experience;
5) give topic questions or assignments that foster the writer's capacity to think logically and that develop confidence in his ability to reason and elaborate an idea or argument;

6) provide more opportunity for writing in the classroom, with the student and teacher interacting in a workshop situation;

7) be concerned more with coherence in all student writing, so that no matter what the writer is saying he is striving to build a coherent unit;

8) emphasize the broadening of vocabulary and the use of imagination as ways to enliven "dead" or flat expression.